

Black Hair Paint

by whatimleavingbehind

Inside a room rarely entered, barely remembered, it sat—the stainless tank, looking like a lost cement truck in the middle of the empty room, hiding five jade blocks behind it. The hidden beast stole its water in silence, drinking from deep beneath the permafrost. This fourth dragon never stopped stealing—never resting, never cooling, an endless boil, boiling away, never knowing quenched thirst. Its heat ran through the pipes like blood, a slow pulse the others had long since stopped noticing. Silas stepped out of the shower and moved to the switch, the ceiling lights falling dark as the enclosure came alive. At once the jade drew breath, filling with light.

The walls stood not much taller than Rachel, leaving a strip of open air beneath the ceiling. The light rested at the edge of darkness—any dimmer and you'd have to squint. The shower was set in the corner of the room, rectangular, close to the mansion's jade block walls but not touching, a deliberate space left between. Thin jade sheets were set just off those walls into the base slab, LEDs running in the space between, the gap about as wide as a hand spread open, light soft and gentle, seeping through the stone, asking to be touched.

The other two sides, facing the open room, were made of thin paired jade sheets of the same high quality, their spacing mirrored the others, the lights burning in the open channel between them. One of the outer sheets extended slightly farther along the open side, sealing the edge so the light stayed held within, glowing inward instead of spilling out. Together they formed a seamless glow, the whole enclosure holding light. The slabs were so delicate they had been flown in by helicopter before the ceiling was set—too fragile, too costly to risk on the long roads north. Each was fitted into narrow ruts carved deep, directly into the large jade slab beneath, the joins near perfect, locking into place without need for sealant. The corners of each sheet were cut on angles to meet perfectly, each edge touching the

next without a gap.

Across the tops, four long strips of jade ran edge to edge, cut at angles to press against one another—thin and exact, closing the light inside like a lid. Along the two

sides that met the mansion's walls, the strips sank into grooves cut into the jade blocks themselves. These were the only jade pieces in the mansion chosen not for size but for clarity—translucent pistachio green, dusted with black specks, even color, only degrees of translucency shifting across its surfaces. While he walked over to kill the lights, Rachel rose and turned on the shower. Now she was sitting back down, her back against the wall, hands and feet pressed flush. A single copper pipe entered high on the wall from the boiler room next door, its mouth dark with heat. The sound of the pipe above followed her, a quiet pulse winding through the copper throat that broke the wall's skin.

Silas slipped back through the narrow opening of the shower—just wide enough to pass, close enough that he turned sideways to slip through. On either side of that gap were square jade pillars, black and deep green like the floor beneath, each seamless, flush on top, rising only to meet the caps that crowned the walls. They anchored the corners where the walls met, one joining the paired thin sheets, the other binding the single sheet to the block wall—smooth, solid, and exact.

The rain head above was the size of a door, wide enough that standing beneath it felt like being caught in a summer downpour. Around it there was space on all sides, more than a few careful feet beyond the reach of the falling water, enough room to sit, lie down, or move without being drenched. The floor was a single sleek slab of jade, black and deep green,

mottled like moss at night. Ground to an almost imperceptible decline, the slab guided the water inward to the drain. It rose a few inches at the sides, abruptly, just enough to keep water from slipping into cracks; the ruts that held the jade walls ran deep enough that nothing could climb back through the other side, even if the water wanted to. The surface was faintly grainy, enough to hold footing but fine enough to rest against without discomfort.

When wet, its colors deepened and shone, as if the stone had turned to glass—alive, breathing in the heat.

Rachel watched Silas step back inside—slow, sure-footed, patient. Steam rising like fog gathering at his knees, shifting as he moved. Nothing escaped the caress of the green glow; it found every contour.

The steam rose fast—water scalding hot, the chill air reacting, curling upward as if trying to escape the heat. When his eyes met hers, the air seemed to draw tight—then snap. The sight came on its own, like Rhames in the museum, not forced, not summoned. Memory. The shower dissolved; stone gave way to forest, fog, and water. It was Rachel’s memory—when she first saw him at the nameless lake, walking in the freezing water, searching for rocks.

Through her eyes—unbuckling her shashka, leaning it against the tree, stepping out of the forest, down the beach, into the water, walking toward him through the fog, looking down at him from above. “That pendant, did you make it?” she said. And then the scene broke—cold to heat, fog to steam, forest to jade walls.

The air, their minds, felt electric—the first trace of their minds’ slow turning. “I think we’re learning to swim,” Silas said slowly. They could

both feel it without speaking. Kageyama had helped them the first time—with Rhames. Now they knew.

Now the seal was broken.

Rachel nodded, smiling—shy about what had just happened between them. She would always be “Weasel Ears”; it would never leave her eyes. She would always be “Birch Tree”; she would never stop loving Silas. They would always be riders of the Lantern Owl. It would never leave her eyes. And the ghost world would never leave his.

Silas looked down at Rachel and stopped walking, though he didn’t realize he had—only that part of him thought he’d stepped into a dream. The black hair paint, long since dry, lay across her face and shoulders like striking tattoos. Over her chest, two wide petal-pink flowers bloomed, the green glow casting over them, catching like blades of grass. Her long legs were gently bent, her palms and soles pressed flush into the moss—his warrior. He remembered her diving over the bear, then walked the few last steps and sat down beside her.

Time hadn’t touched them the way it should have. The tan pills Kageyama had given them that first day—those capsules slowing age to a quarter pace—had done their work. What the pills didn’t still, the plasma exchanges at the mansion had frozen. Their blood quietly renewed, the years dissolved into silence. They had been in their late forties when they died; now, they looked not yet sixty.

Rachel had a dark beauty: almond-shaped eyes, black like volcanic glass, the green glinting across them like thin crescent moons; hair like ink again now; a long nose; a severity that never turned cruel. Ears wide like

something nocturnal, something that belonged to the underground, only deepened her strangeness—a beauty born of it. Her face as a whole led the imagination toward something deadly, long, rarely seen. Endearing in the way of an elephant—tusks and size, keeping its might ever present. After everything—the Lantern Owl, the bears, space, the memory they’d shared—she had never looked more remarkable. Still shy.

Still fierce. Still, she was his glowing marble sculpture in motion, carrying the weight of their love.

As the room filled with a dense pale haze, crawling upward in confused wisps, the warmth had spread over them; the crisp chill in the air had gone, leaving only comfort. The haze clung to their skin, gathering on lashes, beading along collarbones like the first trace of dew. Rachel turned toward Silas—her hand finding his damp chest, her fingers moving over the thick muscle and broad ribs beneath, the powerful cage holding his heart.

While rubbing his chest, she said with a sinister smile, “You almost jostled that bear, Silas.” His response was sharp and immediate. “I almost knocked that bear on its back!” he said, grinning wide in disbelief. “You jostled the bear a little, I guess,” she said, rotating her hip to turn fully, settling into him.

Her long foot dragged along the inside of his leg, slow and deliberate, like an anchor finding its place in the sand, from his ankle to his knee, until her leg came to rest across both his thighs. Rachel was an expert at cuddling. She was lying against him now, almost flat, her head resting near his shoulder, her weight pressed into his chest and side. He lifted her chin with two fingers and leaned down, kissing her softly—noses brushing, foreheads touching.

Then they sat in silence, listening to the soft, soothing sound of water striking stone. In the sound, memory drifted—warmth, stone, and skin folding into each other.

This is something they had shared long before they ever met—a quiet fondness for fog and steam, in dim light or pitch black. They both had dark minds, shaped in ways that never changed. Silas had spent his early years, the first decade he could remember, sitting in the hot shower with the lights off. The fracture had healed, but something inside hadn't yet, leaving him with headaches every day, migraines twice a week—more in summer. After the shower, every other school night, he'd lie writhing—slow and steady—in his bed, his mother or brother would often bring him orange juice.

The lights stayed off for the sensitivity, the heat to soothe, a frozen bag of corn resting on his head, eyes closed, as he sat listening to the water hitting the tub. He was too young for the medication he needed. It made him tough. Rachel had three comforts growing up—her dragon book, the scarred horse, and the banya, if you could call it that. It was barely more than a shack behind her home: The roof was so low she couldn't stand straight, forced to hunch until she sat, a low wooden bench that could barely fit two, the floor packed dirt, and a wide cauldron hung from an iron stand, locally made.

A dozen oil burners crouched beneath it, three rows of four, their wicks fed by kerosene. Resting in small holes dug to keep them in place, the tips of the flames would barely touch the bottom of the blackened metal. The smell of burned oil always clung to her hair, sweet and bitter at once. The deep cauldron took up half the width of the room, leaving a narrow path to slip by, the water rolled and spat when she poured more in from a jug kept near the door. She liked it most at night, after her parents were drunk—when the

house fell into its dull chaos and she could slip out unseen. Her fondest memories were in the pitch black heart of winter—when only the flames lit the room, their reflection caught in the steel of the cauldron and the beads of water on her skin.

No one could see her. No one could call her “Weasel Ears.” She was hugged by the heat while stabbed by the freezing wind that always found its way in—not through just one crack or even three—thin, piercing, cutting through the heavy, humid wave. Rachel grew to seek the cold; the deeper the bite, the more certain she would be left alone, in her sanctuary. It made her tough. The tough you don't realize until others comment on it, then you take notice of.

She had always trusted the cold. It reminded her of him, long before she met him. What originally drew her to Silas, aside from him being a stranger looking for rocks, was that he was walking in the water—something no one did at that time of year in the entire village, except her. She had learned that first night he stopped by for a meal, falling asleep on the couch, after talking for hours about rocks, that a six-hour drive to rockhound Lake Superior's shore couldn't be wasted. Whenever he could make it up, whatever time of year, he was going in—and that was all. Lake Superior was cold, truly cold.

Nature's music would fill the air of the banya like a lullaby—her half hour before the burners needed refilling. The bubbling of the water, the slow shifting weight of her old horse outside, the pressing crunch beneath hooves. Depending on the time of year, there were leaves applauding, screeching wind, rain, owl calls, and silence. Rachel broke her trance—the atmosphere had cast a spell on her. She looked up at her bear jostler. Silas was pulled from his thoughts, drawn back to the sound of rain, in the endless sunset of the stone forest—Rachel had her ear resting under his

belly button; she liked feeling his blood pump faster, and her ear felt good against his skin.

He didn't speak. She couldn't. Rain kept falling, endless. Then he kissed her until she was happy, her soles pressing gently on the sides of his neck, her back flat on the moss, her thighs forming the horizon, and he was the sun just above it.

The horizon collapsed, pulled back down into the dense fog and moss. The sun had set. Now both lay on their backs, their heads turned toward one another, looking into each other's eyes before a tender, patient smile slowly crept across both their faces.

"Maybe we left it in too long?" Rachel murmured. They were both watching the water streaming down each other's faces over the black but not carrying any of the color away. "Maybe," Silas said, somehow keeping a straight face. "It dried too long?" he finished. "Yeah, maybe," Rachel whispered, head tilted, looking at him out of the corners of her eyes—bearing her long teeth in that nervous smile, caught between a frown—the look that broke his heart right in half every time he saw it.

Silas turned, looking at the ceiling. "How long did it say to keep the hair paint in for?" he asked. "I don't think it said," Rachel chirped. Silas stood up, dug through the garbage, found the bottles, read one, then came back with two wooden-handled brushes.

"I think we can wash it off now," he said. His eyes danced for her. He offered a hand and helped her up.

They stood under the sheet of rain that never cools, testing the limits of heat on skin, and washed. When they stepped out again to sit cross-legged, face to face; a delicate smile lingered for some time on them both. “The black hair paint looks great,” Silas said, his heart now in too many pieces to put back together at this time. “Fifty years younger,” Rachel replied, her voice low, her face now seductive.

They came together again like dogs—wild, hot, steaming, alive beneath the shower, within the rain itself. Their love was feral.

It was Rachel who broke the silence as they both sat side by side in front of the downpour, running their hands slowly through its edge. The green glow from the stone forest around them penetrated all the way through with a soft, almost edible presence. A desert like each other—they never grew tired of appreciating it.

It never lost its flavor, its draw. “What if those Blues really were us somehow? What if the pills get better?” she said in cautious wonder.

Her long pale fingers, inches from his, moved like something from deep in the ocean—gentle, the color of bone—pulsing out, then drawing back into a fist like a pale squid swimming up from the depths to find his hand. And then it did. Her palm ran over the back of his hand, fingers clawing down into the spaces between, interlocking. “I hope so,” Silas said, speaking louder and with strength for the both of them, squeezing her hand.

Their locked hands fell with grace, resting on their knees, which were touching, leaning against each other. After some time he spoke again. “I’m sure, with their abilities, we could remember every memory, every day, together, like we did earlier—whenever we wanted.” Rachel’s face

exploded into a wide smile, eyes bright, locking with his. “Maybe we could do it hovering in the air, floating around in space one day,” he said with a smile. She gently shouldered him. What can you say to that.

The grin never left her. They stared at the downpour, lost in thought.

“I want to work out,” Silas murmured. Rachel stood up without speaking. Silas rose too, hunched over as she crawled onto him piggyback. He gripped the dips behind her knees as he lowered himself, then rose again, over and over—bending down as far as he could until he nearly sat on his heels, then lifting back up.

After a while he let her down and started doing push-ups. When he took a short break and began again, she stepped over him, placing one foot flat on his back between his shoulder blades, adding weight, resistance. He finished with her lying on top of him, her jaw against his neck, her palms and toes pressing lightly into the ground, giving him the faintest relief—just enough that not all of her weight rested on him. Then Silas stood back up. Rachel wrapped both arms around his neck as he lifted her—one arm across her back, the other beneath her knees.

She nestled her face against his, slowly rubbing the side of her cheek along his in a quiet, unhurried rhythm. He raised her as high as he could, then lowered her until his arms hung nearly straight down, and lifted again, over and over, steady and calm. They rinsed once more, dried off, then walked back to bed. Rachel spooned him that night, her long legs all the warmth he needed, draped between his.

Her arm lay across his chest. His breath came deep beneath muscle, like a bull’s—hers light and beautiful, like snow whispering across the ground in a

gentle breeze.

Morning came slow. The three of them drank without speaking, their hair now dry and full again—black, like memory returning to its shape.

Kageyama grunted once, in quiet approval. Speaking had, over the long years, become almost something they did only to remind themselves they still could—to keep the sound of it alive.

They didn't need words anymore; they could read everything in a look, in the quiet between breaths. Or maybe they were just two quiet people, who had found peace. Their eyes spoke clearly, in any case.

Polar night. Rachel treasured these hours. Rising without a sound, careful not to wake the Bull exhaling behind her, she dressed in the dark. She filled a thick gallon jug with hot water, grabbed a kerosene can, slipped them both into her insulated backpack, wrapped her face twice with a wool scarf, and threw the wool blanket around her as the door closed. Unheard, she crossed to the edge of the forest, calling with a sweet, familiar sound until she heard the distant steps growing closer and closer, her horse finding his way through the dark.

Although she couldn't see him now, his winter coat was thick—brown and cream—giving him the look of something kept in a museum display, a prehistoric beast long forgotten. She wasn't blind; the snow and stars gave the faintest outlines. But her favorite horse had long since learned not to wander far when the darkness became absolute. “Bratishka,” she whispered as his steps grew closer.

She rubbed the side of his neck, then swung onto him. She never needed more than a light tug on his mane—he already knew the direction of her old home. The ride was brief. Bratishka could see well enough to trot, and the cold around them stayed silent and absolute. He let her off in front of the house.

She couldn't see it, not truly, but she held it perfectly in her mind's eye: mostly gray now, looking more like stone than wood, the walls that had leaned throughout her youth have now twisted and settled into a shape held together only by the sheer weight of the roof pressing from above. The place hadn't stayed upright out of strength but out of stubbornness—wood warped so long it had turned into a kind of fossil. She removed her gloves and ran her hand along the wall, walking slowly—partly to find her way, partly to remember.

By memory alone she turned, counting the steps she had known since childhood, until she reached her old banya. The outer walls were made from wide, vertical larch planks; inside, thinner horizontal boards held them together, with a narrow window facing the house. Rachel ducked under the low frame, her hand searching in the dark until it found the bench; then she sat down. She lit her lighter, grabbed the nearest lamp, unscrewed the lid, filled it, and sparked the wick to life.

One flame steadied. She set it back into its dirt cradle, then filled the next, and the next, working through the three rows of four. The lamps—small glass burners the size of shotglasses, each fitted with a flat wick—caught with soft, separate hisses.

Orange light flickered across the warped boards, making the seams look like thin, breathing mouths. They would burn for an hour and a half, two if she

was lucky; by the time the heat rose enough to make the room a true Banya, she would have only half an hour left to sit in it.

Lighting them now reminded her of the old ritual: slipping out here alone to spark every burner to life, then sneaking back after twenty minutes with enough hot water to pour into the empty cauldron, letting it burn off each time. She had never been able to do this every day—kerosene cost money—but on the nights she could, this place had been her sanctuary. The banya drew old memories toward her the way the dark moves in, steady and unbroken in its steps. Even now, the flames cackled at her feet, spitting small, harsh words at her shadow's edge—weasel ears—clear, cold, and solitary, unchanged by time, and strangely steadying.

After the burners had turned the cauldron hot she unshouldered her pack and poured some hot water from her jug into the cauldron. The water struck the metal with a heavy slap. Years ago she had reinforced the place, catching it before it could finish its slow collapse into the earth. The entire banya had been forced into a crooked lean, its bones brittle from years of freeze and thaw. She and Silas had lifted it upright together before it could fall for good, and as he kept the frame still, she fixed flat copper bars around it—low, middle, and high, inside and out.

Copper bolts ran straight through the planks, tightened with nuts, the corners reinforced with angle brackets. The copper, untouched by rust or cold, held it rigid. Those cracks were older than she was, and the years had only let the wind burrow deeper into every one of them. When she straightened it, she had brought it close to what it once was—close enough to recognize in the dark—but age couldn't be erased. The planks would never sit tightly together again.

If it needed help standing, she would hold it herself. The banya acknowledged her the way it always had, as if she were the only one it still recognized. The dirt floor had long ago hardened in a way that no longer felt like dirt at all—pressed flat by footsteps, shaped by heat, by damp, by the endless freeze and thaw of winters.

You couldn't really call it soil anymore; it had been crushed into something else entirely. But the ground in front of the bench—the place her long feet always reached toward—held two deepened spots shaped by them. The banya remembered her—only her.

Her family never left anything behind. Rachel felt the memory of her youth on her face. She set aside the blanket, the jacket, the shirt, stripping down the way she always had for this, not out of comfort but because the room demanded it.

Flowers bloomed in winter, out of darkness, born from heat and flame; the air was still, the boards motionless. A memory rose with the same precision it always did. A late night: her father weaving across the yard, his steps landing in harsh, uneven blows against the ground. The door cracking open with a force that shook it in its frame. His grip snapping closed around her wrist. The sudden drag forward.

Her face striking the cold earth before she could make a sound. His voice behind her—slurred but sharp, the cruelty perfectly clear through the drunken ruin of it: “get out of my banya, you fucking weasel.”

Another memory followed it, one she never asked for and never escaped, the one that never stayed buried. The horse lifting its hind legs and striking him square in the center of the face. His body thrown backward, a thud that

seemed to come a second slower than it should have, then sliding a short distance across the hard ground. Blood spreading fast beneath his head. She stared blankly and didn't know for how long—just a stretch of time she couldn't account for.

When she came back to herself, the first thing she looked to was the horse. She went inside, filled a bowl with water, took a fresh rag, the needle, the thread. The cut on its head was wide, a deep gash from where his hammer had struck. There was a lot of blood.

She wiped the blood away, then sewed the wound closed. Only after that did she tie a rope from the horse to her father's legs and drag him away to bury, not very far from where she was sitting right now. There was no ceremony.

No help. Her mother was already drunk inside. Just a shovel and blisters forming; she didn't feel like getting the gloves. The time for weakness was over; she would have to do everything now. And no one liked her. No one in the village would pay a fair price for a horse—not to her.

Steam had thickened over the past hour and finally slipped away. Time touched her shoulder. Almost two hours since she had lit the burners.

Some flames still held strong, others trembled low, a few had collapsed into dry wicks. She dressed again slowly, each layer bringing her back into herself. When she called Bratishka, his steps came at once, breaking through the ground in a straight, certain rhythm until his breath pressed against the door. She wrapped herself, stepped outside, and closed the door behind her. Rachel stood still for a few minutes, she turned and spit.

Then climbed onto Bratishka, leaned forward, and let him take her back across the dark. When she slipped into bed, Silas hadn't stirred; he lay exactly as she left him. She put her arm over his chest and closed her eyes.

Before he opened his eyes, in the steady dark the room never lost, he caught the faint thread of kerosene in her hair. Her arm lay over his chest, light and sure, the way something small and nocturnal might settle on a warm stone. He felt the quiet of her—gentle breath against his collarbone, barely there, soft as a creature that knew how not to be heard. He stayed still, letting her presence sink in, the scent, the touch, the closeness.

He knew exactly where she had gone. And knowing it—brought a warmth that settled deep, a kind that didn't flare or shock but moved through him in a slow, certain way, like something arriving exactly where it belonged. It wasn't the act itself that stirred him, but the truth inside it: that she carried her nights honestly, that she returned to him without hiding the shape of herself. He saw her slipping out into sub-zero dark with hot fluid and oil in her pack, riding that patient beast through the black without hesitation.

He pictured her in that fragile wooden closet of a room, the steaming cauldron, flames crawling softly across her face. He never worried when she was gone like this; not inside those jade-block walls. Nothing unwelcome or creeping lasted long here. Over the years they'd found more than a few wolves stomped flat.

Some had slipped through the narrow gaps between the blocks—spaces left when the cranes set them down a little wider apart than intended. The ground there had never been honest; when they cut the trees to lower the blocks, the stumps and the stones had looked nearly the same under the mud

and brush—short shapes that could've been wood or rock depending on how the light hit. The operator had moved back and forth trying to judge the ground, but what seemed level rarely was. One buried stone, rounded at the top, had made a block slide just enough as it settled, turning a tight seam into something wider, an opening shaped perfectly for a hungry body that could flatten itself and push through. A small horse would have caught at the shoulders, but a thin wolf could squeeze through. When something arrived, so did the herd.

Even if you only saw a handful, there were dozens unseen—lurking, waiting, one breath from a full charge. And every horse loved Rachel. And she always came back when she was done. Found him again without breaking the quiet. That was what steadied him—the rhythm the two of them made without effort or speech.

She went where she needed to go; he welcomed her back without a single question. Their bond lived in that space, in the way both could step into their darkness and still return to each other without shifting anything out of place.

Nothing about her felt unusual to him. It all felt familiar, the way weather becomes familiar to the place it falls on. He let his hand move slightly, brushing the bare skin of her forearm—a silent acknowledgment, not of where she had been, but of who she was.

She didn't wake, but she drew closer, her breath warm against his throat in a steady, quiet line.

A few quiet years had drifted by. Kageyama stood at the top of the jade staircase one spring day, watching the birds as they carved long arcs through the air. A raven landed nearby.

“Do you have a message for me?” he asked in Japanese. The raven hopped a few times, tilting its head back and forth more than it stepped, then flew upward and settled on one of the larch branches above him. He kept watching the birds glide and dive. “Do you” the raven said. The raven’s words brought everything together in his mind at once.

Not a moment later he turned walking slowly back to the mansion. He entered, seeing that Rachel and Silas were eating, he sat down, waiting patiently for them to finish. They both loved experimenting with ingredients, combining them to create new foods. Today was a dish made mostly of beef, cooked with a large amount of orange and red habaneros, along with galangal, sweet basil, dill, scotch bonnet powder, ghost pepper powder, and black pepper—heavy on the spices, especially the dill. The cold ingredients—sour cream, feta cheese, finely diced cucumbers, and mango—were spread over the first huge tortilla, another tortilla, this one warm, placed on top of the first, and then the smoking-hot mixture laid down in a single vertical line. An entire container of feta was poured down the middle, with olive oil and honey drizzled over it, folded tight.

They were big; one was enough, even for them. Each weighed a couple pounds. Kageyama watched their foreheads sweat as they ate, holding back a warm smile. They both loved peppers. Silas had introduced her to them.

Of course she loved them. When they finished drinking their small melon sodas—both in one chug—he finally spoke. “You are not those two blues,” Kageyama exclaimed. This was something they had worried about from

time to time, what it meant if it were true. There had been two blues—two of them—and there had to be a reason those two blues had reversed time, and moved the bears for them to live.

Love was the first thing a human mind reached for as an explanation. Only natural; there weren't many guesses to choose from. They had been brought back. Perhaps they had left something on the other side maybe that's what the blues are, or maybe when they returned, a mirror of them had been created somehow—one set visible, the other invisible, maybe, in some way only seen in their minds and no one else's, the origin of the resonance, linked forever, somehow in a different container reaching out to help. They didn't know where they had gone after they died, a thought that had always haunted them, but delicately. What they even were.

Had they been coded somehow, marked, confused as blues from being brought back. They could never wrap their head around it. "I'm certain," Kageyama said.

"I can feel it through the age of my mind. The blues were copying you. It's that simple. Like a raven mimicking, they have scanned us all and know you were brought back, resonance reversed in the cubes.

Billions of minds saw the trial video. A lot of emotion, tension in the field, the web trembling from all sides pointing directly to you two. There weren't two blues at all—there was only one blue.

Like the way they make their crafts. Copying their body to mirror the two of you with their minds. Not really understanding, just mimicking in their way, you being brought back. When you got killed by the bears, the web trembled, they show up, reverse time, take the bears away, like tossing a

turtle back into the water after finding it tangled in a fishing net.

They all look the same. And we've

only ever seen one at a time never two. In those brief, slivers of memory we keep of them, maybe it's the days they are tired, being sloppy." He paused, eyes narrowing. "They look like ants that belong to the ocean," he murmured. "Jellyfish, are outwardly almost identical, male to female. Ancient.

They float instead of walk." His gaze drifted off. He went quiet for a moment. "They paralyze their food before eating it, the resistance we have all felt when they break the barrier sneaking in, and touch our temples, like plugging into to charge," he said calmly. Silas and Rachel both exhaled, turning toward him with the same nervous frown.

"The resistance," Silas said, agreeing. "They feed off our memories." Kageyama took a long breath before speaking again. "Jellyfish were the first animals on earth.

They are like the Immortal jellyfish, older than my mind could hold. They're a perfect match for them—the jellyfish of wherever they come from." Rachel spoke up. "The mushroom fish?" Kageyama and Silas felt their hearts sink with love for her. Kageyama pulled out his phone and showed her a video of a jellyfish eating. "The blue on their skin looks like a jellyfish's too" Rachel added. They all looked at one another.

"Let's check on the horses," Kageyama said, voice suddenly firm. Within minutes they were riding in the bright sun, under the green glow that filtered through birch, larch, spruce, and memories. Fast and hard. Now they

understood the truth of it.

Now they knew. Rachel and Silas's pendants warm against their skin, gently rose and fell from the movement of the loyal beasts beneath them, carrying them farther and farther from their thoughts. Whatever the fishing laws were for Earth—seasonal limits, catch and release rules—none of them knew.

And the three of them carried more tension in the field than anyone alive—fame, age, their minds glowed like beacons. It had happened before—while they slept—in the depths of their dreams the jellyfish had already been swimming, paralyzing, eating, feeding off the light of their memories. They had plenty of those.

It was on all of their minds as they rode.

The impacts of their horses' hooves drew them gently away from their thoughts—each step settling deeper into their bodies, easing the mind the way long winds ease tall grass. Birds called from somewhere in the birch canopy, their voices stitching themselves into the cadence of hoof against earth until it all became one sound. The vibration of each stride traveled up through them—through their legs, through their bodies—like a low, steady pulse. The passing air brushed through their black hair in soft waves, lifting and settling the strands in a rhythm that felt almost sung, as if the wind were humming them forward. Each hoofbeat seemed to smooth over the rough edges of memory. And as they rode, time loosened its grip, drifting into something slower, something that moved the way shadows drape a curtain over the forest—breathing life into the darker things, giving cover to creatures that woke only when the world turned its face away.

Eventually they slowed, letting the horses breathe. A deep calm settled into them, and everything softened: the light, the wind, even their own thoughts settling like dust in a warm room. Sometimes the wind moved through the mansion halls the way it had in the old wooden house, as if trying to remember the shape of their earlier lives.

The next weeks drifted strangely. Days weren't marked so much as felt. Time had become less concerned with tracking itself. Sometimes, walking the grounds, they would hear Dravka and Yar racing their horses nearby.

The thunder of hooves would rise suddenly, startling birds from the branches. One morning the gentle breeze had called for Silas, and he had risen before the sun had. He cast four pendants that day while Rachel rode the property checking on all the horses—"Leaf in Motion," each identical, from one of his earliest molds, showing a single falling leaf with Rachel's face blended into its center, as if her face was lost in thought as she walked, inspired by the way she had once walked toward him through autumn wind as yellow leaves fell around her. An allegory of mortality. He had finished pouring the molten metal into the hot flasks around noon and now had to wait for them to cool. He usually let them cool overnight.

So doing it early allowed them to be fully cooled by nightfall.

When night had come, he grabbed the four flasks and put them in a metal tub filled with water. He let them soak, after a half hour he cleaned the investment off the four castings, which had come out perfect. He used various brushes—starting with metal wire, finishing with a toothbrush. He cut off the sprues and air vents, ground the stubs down, polished each one, then heat-treated them at 500 degrees Fahrenheit for a few hours. These were special.

He added around fifteen percent germanium—no silver—only a copper–germanium alloy. When they finished their heat treatment, they glowed bright yellow-orange with a thick passivation layer from the germanium that, due to the high percentage, looked more like clear enamel, with a delicate haze and a texture closer to glass than metal. Rachel was in bed by the time they cooled after treatment.

Silas cracked the door of their room; she saw the backpack slung over his shoulder. He smiled. She rose. They were riding within minutes—Rachel following Silas, not a word spoken. He hopped off his horse beside her banya, opened the door, filled the three rows of four burners with kerosene, lit them all, then took one outside with him and sat down on the against side of the banya.

Rachel sat down next to him. He showed her the pieces he had made in the light of the kerosene lamp. Rachel’s eyes consumed him; she understood enough before he spoke. Her lips faintly trembled while he talked.

“I thought... maybe we could bury one on each side of the banya. What do you think?” he asked with dancing eyes. Not too long ago he had woken to the smell of kerosene in her hair. She knew he was layering a new memory—one that could sit gently atop the old ones that haunted her here, in the sanctuary of her youth that had become an old friend she returned to check on. To bury something other than her father here.

Rachel nodded smiling softly through pursed lips trying not to tremble, eyes misty. “Can you hold the lamp for me while I dig?” Rachel chirped out a small laugh. He wasn’t going to get her to talk; then she would start crying.

A few feet away from the banya he buried each pendant a foot deep, digging with a small hand shovel he had brought in his pack. They took their time, savoring each moment. The cauldron was hot by the time they finished. Silas took the water out of his pack, poured some in.

They undressed and spent time in the steam. Silas made Rachel laugh many times that night, as the banya fit one and a half people—and that was the size of each of them. They ended up taking the wooden bench out, not long after that, they made love. Both their hair smelled like kerosene the next morning. Time settled back into its wandering pace.

Sometimes the world brightened without warning. Once, in early summer, Rachel began to dance. No music.

No prompting. Just the sudden rise of feeling in her chest. She stepped back and back again, hands on her hips, feet tapping and sweeping in quick patterns—a Russian dance she had learned as a child. With so many years having passed, the world being shut out of this place, each time it seemed more her own. Silas and Kageyama watched, saying nothing. Her happiness washed over them.

It felt good to see her like that, as if the air itself had chosen to lighten around her. Some days were slower—long walks around the property, the birches standing quiet, the forest watching them stepping through damp moss. As a handful of years passed—gentle, creeping, unhurried, these years had become a kind of anchor, something to return to, something that hummed beneath everything that would come after.

People had believed only one thing—that the two walking around Kageyama's property were something like clones. It couldn't be them; the world had watched them die. The only word that made sense was clone. They had only been seen twice; after the second, Kageyama added security cameras—the memory of Dimitri made doing so uncomfortable.

The property was remote. The line was rarely crossed. Kageyama hadn't bothered with anything more than the jade block wall and distance. The gate had never needed a lock; Kageyama—who had ended thirst and hunger—had given the world enough reasons to leave him alone.

People didn't intrude on the man who had kept their children alive. Whatever oddities surrounded him, they were tolerated. He had earned that much. Even the regional officials made a quiet, unspoken pact: whatever happened beyond the jade wall was not their jurisdiction.

The researchers had simply driven up the long dirt road, assuming—correctly—that no one would stop them. The region was far too remote for trespass to matter, and Kageyama had never bothered with guards or a lock on the front gate. The research team wanted to see where it all happened—his old home, where he used to cast. They had seen them both riding past on horses from a distance while making their way through the property, and followed them, hoping to hear some local stories not yet published.

Rachel and Silas had been doing what they often did, making the rounds, checking on all the horses, enjoying the ride. They had been only a few feet from Rachel and Silas, talking in shock to them—Rachel and Silas, unmistakably them. The same height, the same faces, the same pendants glinting on their chests, the ones they had watched Dimitri cut off from their

necks, in the disgustingly kept surveillance video.

It was too precise to dismiss. Silas had quickly come up with the lie that their hair had always been white—they didn't know why—hinting at a kind of albinism, likely due to them being “clones.” Luckily this had happened well over thirty years after them coming back; their older appearance was taken as a sign of some unusual science experiment. One of the researchers had secretly recorded the last few minutes of the encounter—something the whole world, like the trial video, had also seen and discussed. His endless supply of money, whatever they were—he had found a way.

They looked like Rachel and Silas anyway. Just taboo replacements living with a lonely old man, seemingly kept alive through stem cells or who knew what. The second time they were seen was when a group of religious people came, calling them soulless creatures, evil.

They pulled out cameras, recording while they began speaking in tongues. Each sound carried too clearly in the thin, northern air. When the intruders spoke, their voices looked strange in the cold, hanging in the air longer than their words deserved. Silas knocked out a man who raised a jug full of fuel to throw on them and light.

Rachel quickly drew her sword; it whispered out of the sheath with a cold sound that made even the intruders fall quiet. Rachel's call brought the horses fast; the horses weren't stupid—they put distance between Rachel, Silas, and the visitors. Dozens of them rearing, around and through them all. They each hopped on one and rode back. This actually helped their solitude.

People were disgusted with the video—this happening on Kageyama's property, no matter his eccentricities. The fact he had clones there, whatever

they were—was simply written off as part of his genius. The video was unedited, from speaking in tongues to them riding away; they showed it all. Everyone found it repulsive. No more so than the Russian government.

It didn't happen again. Phones worked there in those years. Even with the government's keen eye and muscle, Kageyama still had his

own way of doing things. Advanced electronic warfare was put in place, covering the entire property. Since then, the only phones or electronic devices that worked within the fifteen square miles were inside the mansion and his phone—selective authorization. Nothing that recorded would work now. Over the years, since the two sightings of them, the story of Rachel and Silas had hardened into something simple enough for people to carry without thinking.

Probably clones. Somehow he had gotten lucky, people said—because they were buried in the Arctic; enough of them had been preserved like meat in a freezer. Time had taken the shape of them, but something remained.

Everyone agreed it had to be something in their teeth, or their bones, harvested and grown in secret, reconstructing their genomes somehow with AI and who knew what else. Many chilling and oddly convincing documentaries had come out over the decades since the intrusion by the religious group; some weren't far from the truth. Most didn't believe the documentaries—they were too detailed, too earnest. Truth rarely dressed itself so neatly. They explained in detail why it was impossible for them to be clones—as if they were something else entirely—but these documentaries quickly became like a ghost story nobody really believed. Folklore.

Kageyama didn't enjoy doing it, but it was necessary to protect them. No one could find out he was the one pulling the strings—he made sure of that, but he had those documentaries heavily promoted all over the internet, in plain sight. It worked. People quickly grew tired of the content, arriving at the same conclusion they always did: whatever it was, it had to do with money. That was all. Until one day it all resurfaced.

Someone had waited close with a long-range camera—camping out for weeks—until Rachel and Silas rode out the front gate with two shotguns over their shoulders, heading toward the Yenisei. Ming Wen, a geriatric audiologist, had gotten the photo he wanted. They were betrayed by the sculptures around their necks as they rode out—just as much as by Kageyama's book. Dimitri's surveillance pictures had shown her ears in more than a few, that grotesque, quality in his work, everything had been in high resolution.

Silas—the original—a mental health advocate, had shared, among other things, having OCD. Ming had studied the sculptures of Rachel: the length of the ear in sculpture and in Dimitri's photos matched exactly. Rachel had no photos of herself. That was it—the tender and exacting eye of his sculpting, what he chose to keep or express, Dimitri's photos, and the videos taken by the trespassers.

The second video, at one point getting right up in her face, showed her ears clearly—slightly lower, already more than a few millimeters beyond their sculpted position and Dimitri's photos. Ming had verified this several times over through various AI tools. Ears don't sag in leaps; cartilage yields so slowly—a fraction here, a breath there—that even decades can disguise the drift.

Living beside them every day made the changes easy to ignore. Time hides its own work.

Only when Ming arrived did the scale of it sharpen into focus. And now, decades later, they had lowered close to another six millimeters by his measurements, consistent with people well past one hundred. He was certain. Ears don't have much blood flow.

They remember everything. Whatever force had dragged them through death and back again wasn't his concern—he only measured what time had written on them. No pill or plasma exchange could touch that. Kageyama opened the door to a respectful but clear knock. Ming offered the folder with both hands; Kageyama accepted it with the same quiet formality. Kageyama had only been getting older.

He knew why Ming was here before he spoke—through the age of his mind. The contents of Ming's folder were well presented, accurate, and undeniable. Kageyama slowly looked at every page, and on the last, in the center, a single line: a large number, and an account number. He wasn't blackmailing or threatening; he was selling information. Kageyama took out his phone at once and paid it.

Then he walked slowly behind Ming until he reached the front gate, without a word. He knew he would never see him again or hear of this on the news. Ming was a good man; his thoughts had been of his family the entire time.

Good for him, Kageyama thought. He stayed in the kitchen, drinking tea, wanting to watch them come in. They gave a faint bow when their eyes met his; then they walked to their room. Even after all these decades, seeing them safe still pressed a strange relief into his chest, like a hand smoothing

wrinkled cloth. When they were gone, he stood and went to his chambers, sat down, staring out of his window.

Their ears. Proof that time had been walking beside them all along, unnoticed until now. He had always known that time moved strangely around them, but now it felt as if time had finally spoken its first clear sentence.

The knowledge settled in him with the same weight as winter: slow, decisive, impossible to argue with. Now he knew. It wasn't fear he felt—just a strange, old sadness, a recognition that even miracles had their limits.

He wondered how he had missed it for so long—how the smallest part of a person could speak the loudest truth. Kageyama closed his eyes for a very long time, then rose and walked to their door and knocked. Rachel answered, and he handed her the folder. "It's already taken care of.

But you should see it for yourselves," he said, then walked slowly back. That night Kageyama let another truth settle in his mind. He had already been old when he took his first Pill; Rachel and Silas would go on living longer than him, frozen near the peak of their strength.

Their first Pill had been when they were not yet fifty, right after they had been brought back. But he had been near the end. The age of his mind could see it. Few years.

Maybe. If he was lucky.

His last thoughts before sleep were of whether he'd live to see his one hundred-and-sixtieth birthday—and of his wife, long since passed.

The next morning they sat together drinking their coffee. No one spoke about the night before. They didn't need to. Kageyama surprised them with a suggestion—rockhounding at the nameless lake.

They rarely went there. There were other lakes on the property. A superstition lingered around that place, the quiet unease of knowing it was where they had first met. They went anyway.

It was just a superstition. That was all. They searched for hours, circling the entire lake, walking its uneven edge with the slow patience of people who understood what the place meant. Rachel and Silas—their collection already endless, long since combined as one—knew that anything found here would feel different.

Sentimental, having gone with Kageyama. Silas would make something from them; that was certain. One day.

When they finished, they rode back to the mansion and returned to the table, drinking more coffee while they spread out their finds. Kageyama had chosen only solid colors—almost a dozen stones. Silas had found a gray stone with gentle swirling bands that looked almost like wind, and a bright green one with clear patches scattered through it. Rachel had found only one—a long, thin stone, mostly white, crossed with narrow black lines like grains of rice. They all chuckled when she showed them.

Of course she would find the one that looked like a birch. Later, Silas went outside and cut the stones he needed into smaller pieces, setting a few aside untouched. He spent the rest of the day in his workshop at the back of the mansion, positioned so he could easily dump the rock-dust water into the forest from the wet saw's bucket beneath the top tray where the stone rested as he pushed it forward.

The next morning he showed them the finished cabochons. Kageyama studied them, then suggested they keep the stones on the side of the kitchen table near the wall—an area that had always been bare.

They agreed with warmth spreading over them as they placed the cool rocks into their resting place with a gentle click. Over the months that followed, Kageyama had started spending a lot more time with them—riding, walking, always saying something like, “I need exercise; I’m getting old.” Then, one cold morning, as they were sitting, he slid them three pills each across the cold jade slab, and one for himself already resting next to his coffee. He had given the people who made them something worth six pills. Kageyama’s own pill by the coffee was empty; he thought taking them together would be one last comfort for them. What had been worth about a dozen jade mansions—a story, their story. The cubes, the Blues, the age of his mind, and a few hours borrowing the Lantern Owl, showing them enough.

“I’m dying,” Kageyama said softly. Tears streamed down both their faces. They couldn’t yet see it through the age of their minds. And he knew it. “Weeks. This pill will give me enough to make it to where I’m going.

I’m flying to Japan tonight. This property—everything, don’t worry, nothing will change” he finished. Handing them both a phone, he said, “A

car is waiting down the road.

I wish to go for one last ride with you both.” He took his pill, and they took their three through the tears. No time for words—their eyes spoke clearly. Kageyama rose, walked away, and came back wearing the Casper Crown. They stepped outside. Rachel called the horses. Kageyama turned looking at them, then bowed low—and for a long time.

They returned it. After they had mounted their horses, Kageyama took the lead riding to the front gate. As they left the property, when starting down the dirt road, he turned and gave them one last, brief look, before he took off, they all rode as fast as their horses would go, hooves hitting the cold ground like hammer strikes, Great Ravens flew off branches as they rode past, soaring, wide wings casting shadows on an already gray sky, they cut through the air around them like a hot bullet through the decades of memories.

The few minute ride felt endless. Right when the horses had given all they had, they saw it, the parked car, appearing on the side of the road in front of them, partially hidden behind a tree. They slowed; Kageyama didn't. He rode down to it and unmounted, then entered the car without looking back.

They knew it was unbearable for him. He was their father in all the ways that mattered. Then the car drove away. Rachel and Silas rode back slow without a word and spent the rest of day in bed with the door closed. A few days later the fog was thick in the air. As they drank their coffee, Silas eyed the cabochons he had made from their rockhounding together.

Rachel saw his gaze and knew. He brought some to his workshop, drilled holes into the sides of them, then found cord and made two

necklaces—Rachel’s birch rock, his wind rock—each centered, with one of Kageyama’s stones on each side of them. Rachel had waited still drinking coffee.

They put them on, fighting tears. The new necklaces hung just a couple inches above their bronze pendants. “Let’s go,” Silas said. Rachel followed him to the nameless lake. Both dismounted and walked slowly along the shoreline, reliving memories. After awhile, they sat down looking out at the fog, low over the lake, like it was the day they met.

Silas turned and kissed Rachel. Then he spoke while tightening his hand around hers. “Carved by years, our Souls, Shaped by each other, Will never Die, Memory is the shape of Us.”